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The Playful Space of Workshops: on imagination, improvisation and ignoring instrumentalism

Abstract

In this article we present a new way of thinking about the creative space of workshops and advocate for a move away from the instrumentalist approach that often results from different stakeholders requiring certain outcomes. Using our experience on various projects, we consider the vital role of improvisation and play within a workshop, and demonstrate how work produced in both an instrumental and improvised space can differ. In particular, we describe the process of “de-centring” the “expert” facilitator in favour of a playful and co-produced approach that puts the needs of participants at the heart of the process. We introduce the idea of the workshop as a “magic circle” in which the role of the facilitator is to constantly adjust and check the balance and integrity of the workshop space, rather than worrying about being in the centre of it.

Keywords

communities, improvisation, magic circle, playfulness, workshops, poetry, de-centering, instrumental, funders, outputs

Article

Readers and contributors to this journal alike have been involved in delivering or participating in workshops for many years; as such this article will not speak to the solid conceptions of participatory workshops which are already widely knownⁱ and acknowledged, but rather will contemplate what happens when our rigid, instrumental structures are destabilized, disrupted, or most importantly, played with. The participants of the workshops we will be discussing are not creative writing students, but members of various community groups, people who often do not see themselves as “writers”. We will therefore be talking about arts-based methods, using approaches that originally grew out of creative arts therapy, i.e. using artistic methods alongside therapeutic techniques to help people cope with life situations (McNiff 2008). We also take a broader-than-usual notion of what writing is, taking it back to its dictionary definition of “making marks, letters, words or other symbols on a surface”. Thus the work we discuss might move beyond the writing of words specifically in order to make the processes and workshops more open and democratic.

This article will draw on work done by us on several different projects, including the AHRC-funded *Social Haunting*ⁱⁱ and *Taking Yourself Seriously*ⁱⁱⁱ projects, as well as the Heritage Lottery-funded *Graphic Lives*^{iv} and the Arts Council England-funded *Comics Creation with People with Dementia*^v projects. We name these here for transparency reasons, and with the proviso that all ethics processes were adhered to for each individual project, with relevant attention paid to what can be disclosed and what must be kept anonymous.

These projects have involved working with a wide range of communities including: refugees and asylum seekers; British Bangladeshi women; working class communities in former coalfield areas of northern England; and people living with dementia. This wide range of different projects demonstrates that the ideas and techniques within this article are broad enough and open enough to be applied to almost any project or community organisation which may be being engaged with.

In this article, we will argue for the vital element of playfulness within the workshop space and consider the importance of improvisation as preferable over instrumental ways of delivering workshops. We will use specific examples from the projects mentioned above, and comparing the outcomes from both an instrumental, and playfully improvised, session. We will then move on to consider the way in which playfulness and improvisation within a workshop space better help participants to rewrite existing narratives that may have been imposed on them, about their own lives, and the importance of the workshop as a fragile space, drawing on arguments about the idea of the magic circle. In our thinking around historically constituted imposed narratives, ideas of “narrative templates” (Ewick and Silbey 2003) and “meta-narratives” (Alkon and Traugot 2008) are central.

Oftentimes, when asked to lead a workshop or to work with a community group, there will be multiple outside agents acting upon the session, each with their own demands about expected outcomes and outputs. These differing needs of stakeholders, alongside the often-restricted nature of the time given to spend with any particular group, will often mean that a heavily instrumental approach to a workshop is automatically favoured. The “ideal” workshop we might conceive of is something we might hope would leave a “skills legacy” (Floyd 2004) or that, in some cases, a space might be created where “boundaries between art, education and activism fade” (Campana 2011:278). But within the instrumental workshop, which skills are left as a legacy? Is it just a transference or “deposit” (Freire 1970) of skills left by the facilitator? And whose education, or whose activism, is made space for? The instrumental workshop depends heavily on the “ego”, by which we mean charismatic presence of the “expert”, who delivers a series of ideas, provocations, or suggestions to a group, who then follow the instructions in order to produce a piece of work which is their own, but at the same time recognizably conforms to the broader expectations of what the piece might look like, for example in terms of the form, structure, or language used. There is a definite output, and a clear process which can then be replicated both by the “expert” in another space, and by the participants themselves (or their regular teachers/carers/etc.) should they wish to.

Improvisation is the term we will use as the antithesis, and indeed antidote, to thinking about this instrumental way of running a workshop. In each of the projects initially mentioned above, there

were funder-led, research-driven, or participant-expected outcomes for each session we were involved with which an instrumental approach to running a workshop could have quickly achieved. However, this instrumental approach can feel too much like formal education and, when only visiting a group for a one-off session or for limited period of time, also feel too much of a production line, where the participants are producing the thing they are required to produce; whilst they might be having fun doing so, it is a very narrow parameter for a workshop.

By contrast, improvisation involves the stepping back of the “expert”, the workshop leader in the space; it sees the workshop as something co-produced between all participants and the invited guest, and it opens up a space in which different forms of knowledge and knowing might come to the surface. Improvisation might take different forms: in its most basic form it could be simply entering the space and taking the lead on the “subjects” or ideas for that session from whatever the participants happen to be interested in or talking about that day. It could be opening the space up to a broad interpretation of what “poetry” or “writing” might be, with participants allowed to create visually or artistically, as well as with words, within the same space, as the mood takes them. On a more subtle level, it is simply abandoning the rigidity of any plan and following the needs of the group throughout the session. If this sounds scary then yes, it should be, and it is; and it involves a recognition that the workshop leader is the least important person in the room. That word *plan* though is also important, because the ability to improvise successfully within a space requires the pre-planning of a very instrumental session, which you then adapt, or if necessary abandon, as soon as you enter the space.

Improvisation on its own is not enough, and this is where ideas of playfulness also come in. Playfulness has been defined as “the predisposition to frame (or reframe) a situation in such a way as to provide oneself (and possibly others) with amusement, humor, and/or entertainment” (Barnett 2007:955). However, play can have much wider aims and benefits. Huizinga (1955) views play as “different from ‘ordinary’ life” (4); he describes it as “a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (Huizinga 1955:8). In a similar vein, Van Leeuwen and Westwood (2008:154) discuss Winnecott’s (1971) view of play as occupying a transitional space in which “attributes of objective reality are combined with attributes of imagination leading to the creation of a transitional reality in which one can experiment with different ways of relating to the external world”. Thus, “play is not just an activity but a state of mind” (Van Leeuwen and Westwood 2008:154). Play allows for social bonding through shared experiences, experimentation and discovery, the practice of skills, and fantasy fulfilment (Brown and Vaughan 2010).

Play is, therefore, not necessarily a frivolous, inconsequential activity. Huizinga (1955:5) makes it clear that “some play can be very serious indeed” (5) and, on occasions, “play may rise to heights

of beauty and sublimity that leave seriousness far behind” (Huizinga 1955:8). Nevertheless, as Barnett (2007:956) points out, seriousness is often regarded as “the antithesis of playfulness, and it has been especially prominent in definitions specifying what playfulness is not” (956). Indeed, Glynn and Webster (1992) use an assessment of “seriousness” to indicate when playfulness was absent.

Rather than see playfulness and seriousness as a dichotomy however, in the workshops that formed part of the projects described above, we adopted a more nuanced, multi-layered definition of play, as the adoption of an alternative, playful state of mind that may be light-hearted, but can also be serious. Within a workshop setting, this allows us to address complex, serious, and, at times, distressing issues, but to retain a sense of hope and optimism. It is important to note that the type of play encouraged is not intended to be an imposed form of play that might make teenagers or adults feel uncomfortable, but a form of play that arises naturally from being within a setting that permits challenging topics to be discussed in more novel and thought-provoking ways.

The workshop as a magic circle

Huizinga (1955:10) calls play-worlds “temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart”. The term “magic circle” is commonly used to describe such temporary play worlds in games literature. Remmele and Whitton (2014:120) describe the magic circle as “a metaphor for the common creation of a specific social situation, in which participants cross a virtual boundary into a secondary world or ‘playspace’”. This was our aim in the workshops: to establish a safe space which affords the freedom to make mistakes and to push at the boundaries of everyday “rules”, creating what Salen and Zimmerman (2004:95) describe as “a finite space with infinite possibility”. The rules, codes of practice, moral and ethical structures, and ways of behaving in the magic circle are intentionally different from those of real-life. Harvianen (2012:506) claims the magic circle has a “fictional reality”. It is a place where the frame of reference changes from the real to the “as if” (Remmele and Whitton 2014:113) or the “what if”. Workshops usually require what Harvianen (2012:511) calls a “porous magic circle”; they have goals that exist outside of play. The workshop is never completely sealed off from the outside world and the boundary between playing and not-playing is fuzzy and constantly shifting. As facilitators, our aim is to establish a space in which participants with differing experiences can come together in a shared spirit of exploration that permits mistake-making, make-believe, creativity, and lateral thinking to attempt explanations and solutions that otherwise might not be considered possible.

However, while this porosity is essential to the success of the magic circle established during a workshop, it can also make it fragile. If an incident in the workshop causes the magic circle to

break, for example, too much tension from the outside world to enter, the damage can be difficult to repair. Thus part of the role of the facilitator, in the stepping back from the process of being an ego-centric “leader” of the group, is to hold the delicate fabric of the circle, using the head-space created by the improvised approach to continually adjust and check the balance and integrity of the magic circle, rather than worrying about being in the centre of it.

The Instrumental

In the *Working with Social Haunting* project, we worked with local, politically active community groups and ran a series of workshops (referred to as Ghost Labs) over a number of months, including: a walk around Barnsley led by a landscape archaeologist; a comics workshop led by artist Jim Medway; as well as a poetry workshop. On reflection, and having done much more work on subsequent projects where improvisation, playfulness, and the opening up of temporary play-worlds were much more prominent in our practices, it is now possible to look back and critique the instrumental nature of one of the initial writing workshops. This is not to discredit the quality of the work produced by participants, which was of the highest quality, but rather to show the limited scope and outputs of an instrumental approach when compared to a more improvised or playful approach.

The writing workshop was run in a very instrumental way; the participants had lived-experience of the sorts of topics our research was concerned with, but rather than recognizing their own expertise and allowing the participants themselves to “own” the session, by opening up a playful space such as the one discussed above, the workshop was facilitated by offering up a series of quite restricted or restrictive writing exercises. These exercises, or variations of them, will be familiar to a lot of readers – the sort of didactic exercise which asks the writer to either complete a series of mini-tasks or respond to one overall prompt, and through doing so produce a new piece of work which the participants and the stakeholder, such as the teacher or event organiser, will be happy with, and which are demonstrably seen as a valid and useful outcome from the creative process which has been engaged with.

One such exercise with the Barnsley group involved us asking the participants to imagine someone they felt they could write about and then to “answer”, through writing a line of a poem, various provocations we would put to them; one participant wrote about a close relative who had worked down the local coal mine, and came up with beautiful and eloquent lines such as:

“Proud of the contrast between the dirty black tunnels of his shifts and the freshness of his own labour feeding us at his table.”

and:

“Biceps proudly tensed, made from sheer hard work/ Down the pit, proud of the men under him.”

For someone who might not have written poetry before, these are very strong lines and really help the participant to express the pride they may feel about that particular person, or indeed about their wider sense of their own industrial heritage. These responses, in terms of their quality of articulacy, but also their tone, were typical of much of the work that participants produced during this workshop.

However, in terms of the initial aims of the workshop, which at its broadest was tasked with helping participants come up with a new language to articulate their past in the hopes that they might begin to move towards imagining and articulating a different future, it could be argued that this instrumental approach actually restricted the participants; meaning that their responses, whilst valid and interesting, had to conform to the pre-existing narratives of place and history which they felt as though they were writing into. The notion of “folding in on oneself as the community attempts to find new structures upon which to reinvent itself” (Uprichard 2002: 161) is another way of articulating this idea; the instrumental approach led to a folding in rather than opening out.

We will now examine what happens when a different approach is used.

The improvised or playful

The nine participants in the Graphic Lives project had all been born in Bangladesh and had moved to the UK as adults, usually either with, or to join, their husbands or other family members. The majority of the women had lived in the UK for approximately eight to ten years. They were brought together by a local charity that offers support to local South Asian communities, particularly women. As the women were non-native speakers of English, the sessions were supported by an interpreter/support worker who spoke Urdu and a volunteer interpreter who spoke Bangla. We worked intensively with the women over approximately five months. They met once a week on average to explore their own life stories and the historical narratives of their communities through workshops on life history, cross-cultural storytelling, and digital skills. There was a defined objective: that the women themselves would create their own digital comics using tablet computers. However, the way in which, together, we went about this was fluid and playful. The following describes one of the sessions from the series of workshops.

From a set of cards with words and images created by artist Jim Medway^{vi}, we selected cards with images and simple words that we hoped the women could easily relate to. As the women themselves commented, using a set of cards made the activity appear to be like a game and this helped them to approach the activity in a playful way. The cards might be used in a variety of ways, but on this occasion, we chose to use them quite simply, as resources to encourage the women to talk about their past, present, and future in pairs or small groups. We prompted them using questions such as “What does that picture make you think of from the past?” and “What might that picture mean in the future?”, but it was the women themselves who led the activity, dealing the cards for each other and prompting the discussion within their small groups. The women engaged in the activity willingly and embraced its light-hearted, playful aspect, even when discussing potentially painful memories, such as friends and family members they had left behind in Bangladesh. By maintaining a careful balance, it was possible to ensure the activity was not trivialising their experiences on one hand, or causing distress on the other.

Having discussed the pre-designed cards, in the next exercise, each woman designed her own set of three cards depicting something she felt was important to her from her past, present, and imagined future using words and/or images. It might have been expected that the women would emulate the professionally produced cards they had in front of them as “models”. However, the use of playful approaches and the creation of a “magic circle” in the earlier parts of the workshop encouraged them to disrupt and challenge the “model” provided. For example, many included a number of words, not just one; others included both words and images on the same card, or words in different languages (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Cards created by one of the participants

Tailoring playfulness and improvisation to the needs of group

Of course, the same approach will not work equally well for all groups, and the following are just a few of the ways in which we have adopted playful approaches when working with different groups. Several members of a group of people living with dementia were not comfortable writing or drawing because of literacy issues and/or limited motor skills, so we encouraged them to imagine and describe rather than write, or to take a more playful approach, we asked a volunteer to attempt to draw from their description and then discuss how closely the output reflected what they were imagining.

On other occasions, participants themselves have taken the lead in making an activity more playful. For example, in a comics creation workshop, the participants were asked to create a three-panel comic strip similar to those found in newspapers. However, rather than simply drawing a sequence of illustrations, one of the participants chose to cut up the strip and reconfigure it into a map of the estate where she lived. Thus, establishing the workshop as a “magic circle” not only

allows the facilitators to play and experiment with the techniques used, it also allows participants to question, play, and disrupt our expectations in the ways that they respond.

Rewriting narratives

The notion of rewriting pre-existing and prevailing narratives is an important one here, and really gets to the heart of why improvisation and play should be valued over instrumental approaches to workshops. The job of the workshop is to open up a space, a space we have reached towards (calling it several different things in this article so far), which seeks to be a receptacle for the participants' ideas around the topic of the day, a space in which they might seek to re-invent themselves, a space where the conventional codes of practice, rules, or structures of world as it is fall away and a new and different world, or "fictional reality" (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004), can be imagined and actualized.

Oftentimes an instrumental approach (*write this, think of this, tell me what you think about this*), closes down rather than opens up this space, which means that, with no space to re-invent or "play", the pre-existing narratives of a community or a people tend to be reinforced rather than re-imagined.

One key moment from a workshop, working as part of the Social Haunting project with women who had been active in the 1980s' miners' strike, was when one participant told us that she had an amazing time during the miners' strike: that rather than being a time of struggle and despair as it is often depicted, it had been the best time of her life. Such a bold rewriting of the imposed narratives of the strike would not have been possible within the confines of a purely instrumental approach, and yet such moments are key if workshops are to offer the chance to critique and recreate participants' own narratives of how they view the world and how they view themselves.

The workshop with the Bangladeshi women described above also helped to challenge the dominant narratives of this community, rather than simply reinforcing them, as is often the case in more instrumental workshops. As Bagguley and Hussain (2016:43) describe, the "prevailing perceptions of young South Asian women" are "docile, uninterested in education and destined for arranged marriages". In contrast, many of the imagined futures depicted by the women in the workshop described above focused on education, employment, and ways of obtaining greater freedoms. Moreover, while at first glance the women's aspirations may appear fairly mundane and requiring no suspension of reality, for example, learning to drive or finding work, if we step back and attempt to see these activities from the women's perspective (a possibility opened up through the creation of a magic circle that integrates play and "real life"), these aspirations are suddenly much less straightforward. For example, learning to drive could involve finding a female instructor;

getting money for lessons, and, the greatest challenge of all, finding time when faced with all the other expectations placed on them (intentionally or otherwise) by their families. In this situation, imagining yourself learning to drive does require creativity, lateral thinking, and setting aside the obligations of everyday life. These women are far from docile and uninterested, and through opening up the workshop space, they were able to discuss and produce outputs that begin to rewrite prevailing narratives.

Challenges

While some of the groups we have worked with inhabited the play space naturally from the start, for others who may have come with the anticipation of a more instrumental workshop, it was important to be explicit that we were asking them to use their imagination. For example, explicit use of the phrase “I imagine...” rather than talking about “the future” or even “I hope...” made a difference to the way in which some participants responded. In addition, through working with groups over a number of weeks, connections and trust developed, and they became more open and willing to enter the “magic circle”. This is unsurprising, as entering a magic circle and committing to a “fictional reality” requires a level of trust that needs time to develop. Quite reasonably, participants can be reluctant to accept the word of the facilitator that a workshop is in fact a “safe space”; they need to test this out for themselves before they feel comfortable to “step out of real life”. One of the key things is for the facilitator to make themselves vulnerable in the space as well; of course this is already happening in the co-produced space which is being described, but also the facilitator might speak about their own personal connection to what is being discussed or deliberately self-deprecate in order to lower their status and settle the group in.

The notion of the “fictional reality” of the magic circle, mentioned above, is clearly a very important one, but the notions of co-production and improvised space mean that this idea also has to go further, in that it is important that participants themselves are able to contribute to, and shape, the fictional reality into which they will be asked to enter. Our activities could be considered as a form of community-based participatory research (CBPR), “a collaborative approach to research that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each bring” (Israel et al. 1998: 177). However, while we broadly followed CBPR principles, our overall emphasis was slightly different to that frequently adopted by CBPR research. We were particularly interested in the impacts on participants that, as Wallerstein and Duran (2006:314) point out, “largely remain elusive” in CBPR literature. In designing the project, we therefore also drew on a cultural action model of community education. Informed by the work of Paulo Freire (1972), this stresses the need to engage groups in a process of discussion and dialogue about themselves; their “culture” in the widest sense and ways of life (e.g. family, neighbourhood, personal relationships as well as wider issues such as employment, education). Thus, the

emphasis was not so much on action and explicit policy-related outcomes, but on assisting people to become engaged in a process of reflection on the major themes in their lives.

Groups such as those described in the examples above, for whom the improvised and playful space created and described in this article is beneficial, can often be turning towards art in order to help them construct a sense of their own reality (“The aim of art education is to extend the range of expression and thus extend the student’s understanding of himself and of the world around him” Tyrell et al 2015: 21) . Thus they need to be equal, if not dominant, partners in establishing the fictional reality of the space.

Obviously, by opening up the nature of the fictional space to the participants, there is the potential for tangents to emerge; the magic circle thus needs to be an entity strong enough to support such tangents, but flexible enough to allow them to happen. The nature of the improvised approach means that the facilitator can respond to the fictional reality which the participants wish to create. So, for example, with the *Comics Creation with People with Dementia* project, the first session centred on participant led-conversation around ideas of travel, both the experience of dementia as a journey and the practical problems of using public transport when living with dementia. This participant-led creation of a metaphorical and practical language with which they wanted to explore their situation meant that, in the second session, the facilitator was able to develop a storyline for the comic using a road to plot out incidents (as seen in figure 2). This would not have been as successful in an instrumental order: if we had presented the idea of a road to plot ideas in the very first session and asked the participants to inhabit our



Figure 2: Planning a comics storyline with people with dementia

fictional space; rather it was one that the participants had to create for themselves, and we, as facilitators, had to improvise around this.

The Road to the Playful Workshop

Each workshop, like each improvisation, is naturally different and dependent upon the unique situation presented on any given day. Yet, like seasoned improvisational actors, there are a few key things to have in the back of one's mind as being integral to the success of a lot of the things we have been discussing within this article.

Time is a vital factor; workshops which seek to create a valuable and playful space of integrity for participants to enter cannot do so in a one-off, one-hour visit.

Using your skills: As practitioners, we all have a bag of tricks, exercises, prompts, and aphorisms that we know we can deploy if a session isn't going well, or we could utilize if we were called in by someone to do a one-hour instrumental session. These skills, rather than being antithetical to the playful space of a co-produced space, are actually integral to it; these are the skills you need to bring in to the space but hold at arm's length, deploying them into the room when they are needed.

Credibility: Going into a space as a stranger, with no go-between or support between oneself and the participants, makes it almost impossible to create the sort of creative space we have been discussing in this article. As we mentioned, this sense of credibility, and the trust given to a facilitator by participants can be built over time, but for shorter-term projects, credibility can also be "borrowed" or more quickly earned for facilitators by having some form of buy-in. Is the facilitator from the same area as the participant and thus could they lay claim to the same cultural and social history—is there a shared space of experience? Is the leader of the participants, or the head of their existing group, involved and enthusiastic about the project? What can the facilitator offer to a group of participants which shows they understand or are aware of the lives of the participants in the group? Can the facilitator step down from their hierarchical position of "teacher" and join a democratic space of equal standing with the participants?

Direction: It is important that the tone, subject, and direction of the session are led by the participants, or at the very least co-produced between the facilitator and participants.

Output: Funders, stakeholders, and employers will often have a very set output in mind when they invest in bringing in a facilitator to work creatively with a group of people. It is important that this end-goal remains as flexible as possible for as long as possible. Managing the expectations of various stakeholders is an important aspect of the facilitator's (or project manager's) role to ensure that funders, employers, and participants themselves remain engaged and committed to the project, even though details of the final output are uncertain.

Conclusion

An instrumental workshop can feel like a safe option that is, in general, guaranteed to “work” and will produce outputs that are acceptable to funders and other stakeholders. However, choosing to adopt a more playful or improvised approach that shifts the focus from the facilitator to the participants, whilst more risky, has the potential to lead to outputs that not only challenge existing narratives, but may have a lasting impact on participants and their communities.

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ⁱ See in particular, Coemans and Hannes (2017)

ⁱⁱ <https://www.socialhaunting.com/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://sites.google.com/sheffield.ac.uk/takingyourselfseriously/about>

^{iv} <https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/esri/research/projects/graphic-lives/#d.en.95761>

^v <https://www2.mmu.ac.uk/esri/research/projects/dementia-comics/#d.en.96798>

^{vi} <http://jimmedway.com/other-sessions-projects>